Schwarzesmarken

+++December 20th, 1982 - January 10th, 1983
When I was a child, the world around me sparkled with beauty. I was happy being with people close to me... But now, everything changed. The world has become full of death and destruction, its people cast into the abyss of despair.
But I - I did not lose faith.
This world will shine once again, for we shall never yield. I will prove that. For that, I am ready to lay down my life.

+++20th December 1982, 0700 hours

Katja Waldheim slowly opened her eyes, awakened by the rattling of the undercarriage of the coach. Lights were off in the entire train, and everything was enveloped in darkness. Her breath was white, and she shivered, fighting off the drowsiness that overcame her body. She tried to breathe life into her hands, numb from the cold, and only then noticed that one of her comrades was sleeping soundly on her shoulder.

"Aah, that's why my shoulders are so stiff..."

Every nook and cranny of the coach, from the overhead bins to the compartments under and between the seats, was stuffed with duffel bags, bed rolls and other various equipment and personal belongings, while the seats themselves were occupied by young men and women in standard Bundeswehr field uniform, huddled together and sleeping peacefully. The four hundred kilometre trip from their base in Paderborn towards the front lines in the east took its toll on the young soldiers.

"You'd think this was a refugee train... ah, but I can't say that out loud, can I, some people might get mad..."

Katja shook off those imprudent thoughts and, looking around, noticed a tiny light coming from a chink between the metal sheets that had been used to cover all windows.

"Sun's up?.. finally..."

Carefully tiptoeing around her sleeping neighbours and their things, she slowly made her way towards the door, when--

- Uh! Bloody commie... Imma flush yer books down the toilet, - grumbled one of her comrades, clearly unhappy at being woken up.

Katja chose to ignore the threat, however real it may have been, and finally made it to the exit. She knew that only those doors were closed not with sheets of metal, but simple curtains. Rules ordinarily forbade soldiers to look outside, but at this hour there would be no sentries around. The faint, flickering light from the window drew her like a moth to the flame, and her chest seized suddenly, making it painful to breathe... She looked around once again, making sure no one was headed her way, gently pushed aside the curtain... and let out a deep sigh.

On the other side of the window was an endless sea of white, scattered little groups of houses and trees, - and above them, a gloomy eastern sky, barely touched by the first rays of daybreak. A serene, if not uncommon, sight.

"I don't know why... everything seems so... familiar, even... dear to me...."

A snow-covered field flew past, followed by a narrow railway platform with old posters of the SED[1] on the walls of the somewhat decrepit station building - indeed, the train had crossed the border during the night, and was now deep in East Germany.

"Finally... I'm here."

Katja took a photo out of an inside pocket of her field jacket, smiled faintly, murmuring:

- Now we'll meet again for sure...

Her voice broke and turned into a whisper.

The land before Katja's eyes was the land of war, every square metre of it drenched in the blood of the countless fallen. Through leaden clouds, pregnant with snow, here and there shone rays of light, like translucent ladders by which angels furtively left this sombre domain. The land of war was under the spell of the cold, itself a consequence of the war with the BETA, and snowfall was now frequent in spring months. After the disastrous failure of Operation Palaiologos in 1978 and the ensuing fall of Poland the following year, Germany had become the front line of defence for the whole of Europe, a battlefield on which the endless war of attrition went on...

+++January 10th, 1983, 1100 hours
++German Democratic Republic
++Outskirts of Cottbus, 6km west of the Neisse river
++Fort Spremberg

The positions of the 35th NVA[2] mechanised infantry regiment "Ernst Schürer", second battalion, third company, which only today had held them against three tank-class BETA assaults, were by then a living hell. Narrow trenches with reinforced concrete walls were filled human and alien bodies, and as horrendous as it was, the soldiers did not even have time to separate the dead, much less give them proper burials. The company commander, Oberleutnant Claudia Quirnheim felt the bitterness of despair on her lips. Not more than fifty men, a quarter of the initial contingent, were still capable of holding arms. Considering the fact that they had been engaged in close quarters combat with the BETA the entire day, it was hardly surprising.

"Another attack, and we're done for..."

[1] Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or Socialist Unity Party of Germany, ruling party of the DDR.
[2] Nationale Volksarmee, or National People's Army, armed forces of the DDR. Widely considered to be one of the most professional and able armed forces of its period, and an elite of the Warsaw Pact troops.

During the night the weather conditions worsened considerably, and visibility was effectively limited to less than half a kilometre. Claudia had to make a decision - to retreat to the secondary defence line, or stay and fight, - the latter would inevitably mean the destruction of the entire company. All communications with battalion HQ had been down for a long time already, and the decision was hers to make.

"But if we do leave our positions, we could be court-martialed..."

The NVA was officially the Parteiarmee, army at the service of the party, so frequently more importance was attributed to following party slogans and proclamations, rather than considering the necessities of warfare. For her, promoted to the rank of 2nd lieutenant after graduating from the national university and passing a half-year basic officer course, this was a terrible, unjust burden.

"Where are our reinforcements?.." - was the thought that raced in her mind as she looked over her comrades, - former students barely out of the classroom, now shivering from cold and fear in the trenches. All of them volunteers who joined the army on the same day, all of them knowing that there was nowhere to retreat to.

- Commander, here they come again! BETA herd, five hundred units or more!

- Goddamn them!..

From the depths of the swirling blizzard they came; on the field, littered with corpses of their monstrous brethren, they advanced; at least five hundred smaller ones, and behind them, massive shapes of three dozen grapplers, with their terrible weapon-arms.

- All units, fire at will! Do not target the grapplers - leave them to our support!

The overwhelming hail of fire that followed almost drowned out her orders. The staccato of sustained fire from NSVs[3], the regiment's main firepower, was soon joined by the characteristic thumping of mortars, their crews loading their last rounds; and with them, the booming of the main guns of their fire support - a tank platoon entrenched behind their defensive line. Like droplets of blood the tracers sprayed across the enemy lines. But the BETA did not stop. The ones that survived were mostly tank-class - better armoured yet sufficiently agile six-legged monsters the colour of dried blood.

The soldiers who were previously busy carrying ammo boxes for the machine guns were already affixing bayonets to their MPi-Ks[4], and in a few seconds the first monstrous tank-class creature appeared over the parapet, its forearms reaching into the trench, as if intent on scooping out its defenders.

- Don't you fucking dare, bloody monster!! Stay awa-a-ay!!!

All of the soldiers crouching in the trench opened fire, and a hail of bullets shredded the beast, leaving the men covered with gore. However, the BETA were too many, and the defenders too few. In the next

[3] NSV (Nikitin-Sokolov-Volkov), a 12.7×108mm calibre heavy machine gun.
[4] DDR variant of the good old AK-47.

moments the regiment was engaged in brutal close combat, and cries of pain and anger echoed over the defence lines.

- Aim for the arms! The arms!!

Claudia tried to shout orders, but could only watch as her comrades died one by one. Then right above her appeared the ghastly form of another BETA, its incredibly strong paw already raised, ready to strike with incredible force. Reflexes saved her - she dived instinctively and rolled over on her back.

- Eat this!!

A precise burst of fire ripped apart the beast's joint, - infantry weapons were, after all, quite effective against the smaller BETA species. Then - with a nasty metallic sound, the rifle stopped firing, its bolt locked halfway.

- Jammed?!.. No way!!..

The most reliable automatic weapon in the world, an AK, jamming at this moment?.. She had no time to check, as an incredible force swept and threw her into the wall. Overwhelmed by agonising pain, she spat blood. Broken ribs must have pierced her lungs, she thought distantly, and realised that it was the almost severed arm of the BETA that struck her like a whip. No one could help her. Her comrades were fighting their own opponents - and dying, smashed, eviscerated, beheaded and torn apart.

- No... no!..

Feeling a primal, animal fear of death, Claudia looked at the alien through a bloody haze. And then she heard the sound - the ear-splitting roar of jet engines just overhead.

- They... the fighters!.. They're here!..

Her heart was suddenly filled with an insane hope.

"Finally!.. Help… reinforcements... finally..."

Crawling along the bloody, grimy floor of the trench, she desperately looked up, trying to find her saviours in the morning sky... and a second later, she saw them. Eight MiG-21s, main tactical fighters of the NVA, their silhouettes clear against the pale sky, cruising above. Graceful and unperturbed, they went on, soon disappearing into the blizzard, unmoved by the tragedy below.

- How... why... why?! - a desperate cry came from her throat, - Why aren't you helping us? Why?!..

In the next instant, powerful jaws closed on Claudia's neck.

Oberleutnant Claudia Quirnheim did not know. This particular unit had pitilessly disregarded allied forces time and again, driven on by their mission, earning themselves more than a few unsavoury nicknames: the Reapers, the Butchers - Tactical Surface Fighter Squadron 666 "Shwarzesmarken".

+++1110 hours
++In the air above Fort Spremberg

As usual, the steady stream of new requests for reinforcement and cries for help went on, as constant as the whining roar of the aircraft's engines. Unterleutnant Theodore Eberbach, a pilot of the 666th TSF squadron "Schwarzesmarken", grimaced and pushed on the control pedals, making his "Balalaika"[5] lurch forward and gain a little speed. Minute after minute, landscapes projected onto his retinae changed: white fields under grey skies, burnt forests, abandoned fields strewn with BETA corpses... and if he looked behind his shoulder, he would have been able to see the vicious battle with the BETA on the front lines. And the only thing he could permit himself was a deep sigh, - he had long since learned not to think too much about what was happening around them.

{{ *Achtung!* Schwarz one to all.}}

On his retinal display appeared a new communication window. A wave of golden hair, fine, aristocratic features and a cold, strict countenance - unmistakeably the ice queen herself, squadron leader Irisdine Bernhard.

{{ Get ready for enemy engagement. Comms may be spotty under the heavy metal clouds, maintain formation.}}

- Eight, copy that, - his toneless reply drowned in a chorus of acknowledgement from the other pilots.

The 666th consisted of eight MiGs, and though they were supposed to have twelve machines, by now there were very few units in the entire NVA which had a full contingent. For the same reason, they were now flying in arrowhead formation, four including the commander's machine leading, four following. The commander's MiG-21 was outfitted with additional sensory and communications equipment. The entire head of the machine was slightly different, with the main antenna brought forward, so that it bore a distant resemblance to the legendary unicorn.

"Eight kites against the whole bloody BETA force?.. Suicide job as usual..."

Theodore gave another sigh. He felt the pressure of the coming fight.

[5] Codename for Alternative's MiG-21, believe it or not. It's a Russian string instrument, a really cliché way to name a vehicle.

In the past several days, triple-six squadron had been mobilised to check a large-scale BETA assault from the eastern shore of the Neisse river, their mission being Laserjagd[6] - penetration deep into enemy territory with the objective of taking out laser-class units that constituted the main firepower and core of the enemy force. At this time, the squadron, using NOE flight[7] and manoeuvring with their jump boosters, was quickly but stealthily proceeding along the shortest route to the predicted objective location, along the left flank of a large group that was advancing west. In the clouds charged with heavy metal particles that had been put in place by preliminary bombardment with AL shells[8], the threat of detection and exposure to laser fire was diminished; however, it was not an ideal method either, something akin to taking about a couple of bullets from the revolver when playing of Russian roulette. The heavy metal clouds brought their own problems for TSFs operating under them: increased communications interference meant that datalinks through which the tactical information sharing system worked were now useless, except at close range. Pilots were only able to maintain communications with their wingmen, and there was no link with the four rear-guard machines that had been trailing four kilometres behind.

The blizzard only seemed to get stronger, and consequently the visibility got worse by the minute. The situation was so bad he got a queer, hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. His nervousness must have shown in his handling of the machine, for moments later a new comm window appeared on his display, from which a pilot's face regarded him sternly.

{{ Schwarz three to Schwarz eight - keep on course, son! What are you, dreaming?}}

Theodore, startled, barely stopped himself from clicking his tongue in frustration and glanced at the speaker, seeing the unmistakeable black hard peppered with grey. The voice belonged to Oberleutnant Walter Krueger, who, a veteran officer at 29, rumoured to be a survivor of Operation Palaiologos, was much more experienced than the 18-year-old Theodore. Being the most senior pilot in the squadron, he was Irisdine's adjutant, responsible for all personnel-related matters.

"When will they stop treating me like a kid?.."

...but Theodore answered as levelly as he could:

- Eight, roger that.

He knew it was a good idea to watch what he said, because of the recording equipment in his comms. Any and all sounds, including whatever he would whisper to himself, would be picked up and recorded by the sensitive microphones.

[6] It's what the furigana says (and it took me a long time to figure out). 'Jagd' being German for 'hunt', naturally.
[7] Nap-of-the-earth flight, a method of avoiding detection by hugging the landscape (so at very low altitude). Also "flying under the radar". Note that the arrowhead formation is much more difficult to maintain at low altitudes.
[8] Anti-Laser shells.

Meanwhile, the cries for help continued. Another TSF squadron which was supposed to move around the BETA from the other flank came under laser fire and was pinned, which under the circumstances meant almost certain annihilation.

{{ Oi, nugget. Watch your distance, you're coming too close.}}

Walter was grumbling again. The practice in most units was to keep a certain distance between leading machines and wingmen, with dispersion of forces cited as the main reason.

"The laser-class' spread... did they get their predictions wrong again?.."

Inputting the coordinates of the most recent calls for help, with the help of his wide-range datalink Theodore quickly found their source. It was a dreadful, absurd situation that they could do nothing about, - a daily occurrence on this field of battle.

{{ Ma'am, the 721st's requesting backup--}}

{{ Request denied}} answered Irisdine immediately, without a hint of emotion. {{ Any distractions from our main objective will have to be set aside. These aren't the first or the last that we will have to ignore, but we have a mission, a responsibility to save many more lives}.}

{{ Shwarz three copy. Everybody heard that? We're proceeding on course.}}

Feigning impassiveness, Theodore felt disgust somewhere deep down. No, it wasn't the coldness of the two officers towards their allies, - what bothered him much more were the pretty words coming out of Irisdine's mouth. "A responsibility to save many more lives ", bah! Theodore had a good reason to think that way about his commanding officer that way.

"Because of them, I--"

{{ *Feindkontankt!* BETA group, at 010! Heading 170! I read at least fifteen thousand!}}

Walter's sudden shout interrupted his thoughts and made everyone check their radars.

The monsters were indeed heading west. Most of them were tank-class BETA, with a few warriors and grapplers scattered about. The distinct shapes of the laser-class targets were nowhere in sight, though according to intelligence reports, they would be at the back of the horde.

"That's way more than we expected!.."

During the briefing, they were told that this particular enemy formation totalled around thirty thousand. If the radar, however, had already picked up more than half of that number, it was safe to double the predicted total.

"Damn them, they get the numbers wrong every bloody time..."

{{ By the way, Walter, you know that joke?}} Irisdine spoke in a level tone, as if she hadn't noticed the enemy at all and was asking about the weather.

{{ Which one?}}

{{ Someone sends a question to the Berlin radio: are the BETA edible at all?}}

{{ ...And?}}

{{ They answer: of course not. Unless you're an *Engländer.*}}

Several muffled laughs could be heard in the comms. The dreadfulness of the rations distributed to the British army, stationed in the DDR under UN command, was legendary even among East German personnel, and Walter chuckled appreciatively:

{{ Yes, and there's so many of them here... we should export them to those *Inselaffe*, they'd probably thank us.}}

{{ Right, - so first, let's turn those over there into paste.}}

Theodore didn't even smile. He understood that Irisdine's words were meant to slightly relieve the tension of the pilots about to engage the enemy in a fierce close quarters battle. As if following his thoughts, Irisdine changed the tone of her voice, and gave the order:

{{ Schwarz one to all, we'll cut off this group in front of us first!}}

{{ Jawohl! - answered the chorus of pilots' voices}}

{{ Ready! Down we go!}}

Theodore yanked the joystick towards himself, giving the machine full reverse boost. The G forces generated by the abrupt deceleration clamped down hard on his flight suit, designed precisely for such occasions. Four MiGs landed together, sending fountains of snow

{{ Deploy shields!}}

{{ Roger!!}}

All four machines of the lead unit instantly put forward huge assault shields, in a manoeuvre reminiscent of the hoplite phalanxes of Ancient Greece. All the machines of the squadron except one carried the standard loadout of the NVA's tactical fighters: a multipurpose assault shield "Shürzen"[9] in the left hand, a WS-16C assault rifle in the right, plus an additional weapon on the gun mounts.

Infrared sensors showed enemy signatures approximately a thousand metres ahead and behind the unit. As far as they could see on their radars, the snowy plains were crawling with BETA, a picture reminiscent of tsunami waves coming one after the other.

[9] See translator notes.

{{ All units, *feuer frei!* Aim at the group in front!}}

At Irisdine's command, the four lead machines opened fire. The roar of their assault rifles drowned out the howling of the blizzard, and an approaching grappler exploded, fountains of blood and gore painting the immaculate snow, - a horrific modernist tableau if there ever was one. Surrounding BETA, perhaps in appreciation of the art, reacted instantaneously, turning to attack Theodore and his comrades.

"Here they come!.."

{{ Draw them towards us - fire and retreat!}}

All four machines, perfectly synchronised, turned their jump unit nozzles forward and gave a short boost, quickly putting an additional couple hundred metres between themselves and the BETA in front, continuing to fire while giving reverse boosts to decelerate. Such back boost jumps were one of the main tactics of anti-BETA TSF warfare.

- Eat lead, *Hurensöhne!!!*

With grim satisfaction, Theodore sprayed the enemy with volleys of 36-mm shells, turning grapplers and tank-class monsters into mincemeat. That their diversion was a success quickly became evident, as the stream of incoming BETA only grew, - though, as a matter of fact, thinking about all those creatures coming after him and his brothers in arms did not make him happy.

Even concentrated fire could not stop the BETA advance, though it did slow them down, and now red waves of tank-class creatures started flowing around the TSFs in an attempt to flank and surround them.

"We're running out of space, won't be able to retreat for much longer..."

No sooner had the thought crossed Theodore's mind that a clear voice broke through the tense silence:

{{ This is Schwarz two, ready to provide covering fire!}}

A new window on his display showed the four rear-guard machines landing behind them.

{{ *Feuer frei!* Target the flanking tank-class!}}

The rear-guard promptly followed the order of their leader, first lieutenant and second in command of the squadron, Pham Thi Lan, a German of Vietnamese descent. The appearance of their backup made the situation slightly better - attacking tank-class BETA were being decimated, and more and more enemies converged on their location.

"If we continue like this, we might draw away most of those that would be covering the laser-class..."

As if sensing his line of thought, a shrill, angry, almost hysterical voice pierced his ears:

{{ What are you doing, comrade captain?!}}

Another comm window appeared, showing the face of a pilot wearing thick horn-rimmed glasses. She wasn't even trying to hide her irritation.

{{ Why are we not attacking?! We don't have time to waste on this!}}

This only served to create additional tension for the pilots engaged in combat, - but Gretel Jeckeln, the political officer of the squadron and one of the pilots of the lead flight, clearly didn't care.

{{ We have standing orders - take those Lux down by 1200 hours! I *demand* that we stop these foolish diversions and proceed to our objective!}}

"Ugh... there she goes again..."

As much as he wanted to snort derisively, Theodore only allowed himself a stoic frown, not risking to let his opinion show. After all, Gretel, as a political officer, was tasked with observing and controlling the pilots' loyalty to the party, counter-intelligence, propaganda and rooting out of anti-communist elements. To ensure that the army acted in line with the policies of the SED, the Politische Hauptverwaltung, main political administration of the NVA, assigned specially trained officers to every unit of the armed forces. As a result, the NVA had effectively two command structures and hierarchies[10]. Political officers were given wide-ranging powers, and even questioning tactical decisions was in their field of competence, not to mention personnel-related matters and such drastic measures as removal of the commanding officers. Naturally, any disobedience towards the political officer would have grave consequences for the offender. Now and then one would hear a story of a commander refusing to give in to unreasonable, absurd demands of their political officers to preserve himself and his unit, who was forced to shoot the PO, - and was then quietly executed by firing squad, his subordinates and relatives taking a one-way trip to correctional camps.

{{ Our mission is to destroy the laser-class! The more we wait, the more troops we lose! It could end in them breaking through our front line!}}

"Yeah, and she doesn't think for a sec that if we followed everything to the letter, we wouldn't ever stand a chance of making it?.."

{{ Aren't we supposed to complete this mission no matter the cost, comrade captain?!}}

{{ ...Comrade lieutenant.}} Irisdine's voice was calm. Only she, as the squadron commander, could speak with Gretel as an equal. {{ The enemy numbers are considerably higher than forecasted. Have you considered the fact that this may impede our progress towards the main objective?}}

{{ We don't have time for this! I think we've done enough to divert some BETA here!}}

[10] Historically inaccurate. Even in the Soviet army, political officers/commissars had similar authority only around the time of the revolution and civil war; afterwards the chain of command was strict and unified (and any officer was politically educated to begin with). Their tasks were, indeed, supporting the doctrine, loyalty, and often the fighting spirit of the troops, and they could act as commanders in exceptional cases (such as during WW2 when the commanding officer was killed), but they would not have such wide-ranging powers.

{{ Tactical considerations are within *my* competence. Continue diversion.}} was Irisdine's cold reaction to Gretel overstepping her authority.

It was clear that she was planning to draw as many BETA as possible to one place, and then quickly outmanoeuvre them, striking at the soft underbelly of the enemy forces and wiping out the laser-class.

{{ Right now on the front line, men are dying to buy us some time! The fact alone that you're ignoring that can be considered treason! Do you understand or not that the party speaks through me?!}}

Gretel, only a first lieutenant, was able to threaten an officer that outranked her precisely because of that dual command structure. Seeing that Irisdine was hesitating to answer, Gretel's lips curled up in an unpleasantly triumphant smirk.

{{ You *will* follow my advice... or I will assume direct control of all the squadron's machines.}}

The main political administration had since the beginning been of the opinion that political officers in all TSF units should have priority control access of all machines of their unit. Thus, if it came to that, a political officer would have the option of remotely controlling all TSFs, - on top of controlling all comms and even injecting drugs into the pilot's suit and disabling the fighter's systems.

However, Irisdine still didn't answer, and Gretel's face betrayed some confusion and suspicion. The tension was broken by Walter's shout:

{{ Commander! Multiple enemy signatures to the rear! Grappler reinforcements!.. Reading... over two hundred! Distance 1200... 1000... contact in sixty seconds!}}

"Damn their timing!.."

Thedore cursed under his breath, turning his sights on the new threat. A sizeable horde of BETA evidently separated from the front wave and was heading back. Everyone instinctively looked at the commander's machine.

{{ Lead flight, move to engage the grapplers! Rear-guard - set up behind them, get ready to provide covering fire!}} ordered Irisdine without a hint of hesitation in her voice.

{{ What the hell, comrade captain?! This position has no tactical value, why are we still defending it?! I told you--}}

{{ These need to be destroyed to ensure the success of the operation. All units, *schneller!* Do not waste time or ammo!}}

{{ We don't have time--}}

{{ We mustn't let them turn back towards our own lines! And they might pursue us and strike from the back when we attack the Lux! We will destroy them here and now!}}

"Scheisse! Not like we have many options now," - Theodore thought, gripping the joysticks tightly in a bid to stop his hands from shaking. It was a first for him, too - this many BETA, in such poor visibility. One couldn't even predict how effective the squadron's fire would be.

In the next moments, a horde of grapplers emerged from the storm and closed in, - the distance to the first ones was already less than eight hundred metres.

{{ Target the first ones - let's stop them here! 120-mm, three volleys! Fire!!}}

Four assault guns spat orange flame, and their shells landed in the middle of the advancing BETA, ripping apart some and injuring others. The monsters weren't all dead, but clearly incapacitated, so that the ones who followed were forced to go around them - their ranks now in disarray, the advance slowed down considerably.

"So that's what she counted on!.."

He didn't even have time to fully appreciate her plan, when he heard a new order:

{{ Squadron, switch to 36-mm, fire at will! Kill them while they're still confused!}}

- Hah! Basta-a-a-ards!! - he obeyed with relish.

The deep booming of the 120-mm was replaced by the staccato of the assault rifles, spewing a barrage of armour-piercing rounds towards their targets. The exploding grapplers mixed with the snow to create a bloody mist that hung like a curtain in front of the horde.

{{ Die!! Die, you monsters, diiiiiee!!!}} Gretel was shouting, wildly spraying the mist, apparently relieving some of her frustration from the previous incident. She was interrupted by a warning shout from Irisdine:

{{ Careful! There are still live ones!..}}

{{ ...Eh?!}}

A group of flanking grapplers appeared from the mist, charging Gretel's machine. Carelessly absorbed by her shooting, she didn't have time to react, - and from Theodore's position, he couldn't hit them without risking friendly fire. The political officer, though above average for a normal TSF squadron level, was clearly the least experienced pilot of the 666th.

"*Dumme Schlampe!*.."

Theodore reacted almost instinctively, firing his jump boosters. A split second later he was already between her and the charging beasts, breaking hard in the deep snow.

- Won't get past me!!

Still sliding across the snow, he aimed and fired at the attackers, - they couldn't have been more than two hundred metres away by now, even ripped apart by bullets they died, but others kept on coming, - and then the last one fell not even ten metres in front of the two TSFs. Theodore exhaled, and glanced over the dead BETA.

"If I missed, we both would've bought it right here..."

{{ L-lieutenant Eberbach!..}}

Ignoring the embarrassed and shocked Gretel, he promptly returned to his position.

Meanwhile, the horde continued their assault, and by now there was at least a thousand already within visible range. It was clear that despite their losses, they wouldn't stop.

{{ *Achtung*, squadron!}} Irisdine's voice came through the cannonade. {{ We're stopping our diversion! Prepare for jump on our original course, NOE, arrowhead formation! And don't get your head above thirty metres! }}

{{ Roger! }} came the reply from all pilots.

Eight fighters fired their engines simultaneously, and jumped. Below them were tens of thousands of gathering BETA - still an obstacle in their way, despite all they had destroyed. But now, they would slip into the breach, and find their real target - the laser-class. From readouts on his retinal display, Theodore quickly understood that this diversion cost them around thirty percent of fuel and ammunition.

"Now begins the real deal..."

The queasy feeling, forgotten in the heat of battle, returned. Between the numerical superiority of the BETA, the worsening weather conditions, and the limited supplies, there wasn't anything that would make him particularly cheerful. And there was the matter of Gretel and her political guidance...

"But I will survive."

Trying to rid himself of dark thoughts, Theodore once again gripped the control sticks.

"I will not depend on anyone. Only my own strength."

He had always thought the feelings of friendship, attachment or consolation, that his comrades sometimes sought, were only a sign of weakness. The only things that mattered were those that helped survive in this war. Trusting unquestionably, or helping someone, were akin to baring your own throat for the knife.

"I know what happens if you trust someone. That's why..."

Theodore's eyes glinted with hate for an instant.

He was thinking of none other than the commander of the Schwarzesmarken, Irisdine Bernhard. That day, three years ago, the people closest to him were taken away, stolen, leaving him in the depths of despair. And she was one of the hounds of the system...

+++1125 hours
++German Democratic Republic
++Cottbus area, Cottbus base headquarters

- Confirming flare signal from the 611th squadron. They're engaging. Comms down after entry into metallic clouds!

The operator's report drew sighs from the people in the small control room.

- This makes four. All TSF squadrons now engaged in combat.

Sighs, again. All those present here, in the main control room of Cottbus regimental command, thirty kilometres behind the front lines, were watching the situation tensely, but it felt as if no one really knew how or even wanted to evaluate it. All eyes were on the huge wall screen, on which was projected the most recent tactical information about the unfolding battle.

- Attack success chance - sixty-six percent... - as if voicing what was on everyone's mind, murmured second lieutenant Marai Heisenberg, frowning.

- We knew, Marai.

++1980's Europe++
The utter failure of operation Palaiologos in 1978 brought with it the understanding that humanity was severely outnumbered in Europe. The main BETA offensive restarted the following year, making the forces of the Soviet Union retreat first west of the Urals, then further - until humanity's defence line ran through Poland and Ukraine. Their next logical targets would be East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania, - but these would use terrain to their advantage, building defensive lines on the Oder and Danube rivers, and the Carpathian mountains, managing to complete them before the fighting in Poland and Ukraine was over. As a result, the BETA advance was checked, and from 1980 the situation stabilised.
In January 1983, the BETA are held back by the Oder-Neisse, Carpathian and Transylvanian defence lines, as well as two beachheads (Kurland and Pomerania), which all served to separate the BETA forces, as well as evacuation centres for the large numbers of refugees from countries west of Poland. However, as time passed, the strength of the BETA only grew, and with them the fear of a successive collapse of the front line.
The main strength of these lines was comprised of Warsaw Pact troops, with Western countries such as Britain and West Germany providing assistance as part of UN forces, and a common front was never agreed upon. Humanity, still divided by the Cold war order, was facing their greatest threat yet.

- M-major?! Marai, startled, turned around and saw Major Hannibal Hölzer, commander of the special composite air group "Hannibal", based in Cottbus[11]. Right now three of its squadrons were in combat, along with the 666th, which ordinarily had been a unit under the direct command of Eastern HQ, in reserve until recently, then transferred to the Oder-Neisse defence line and temporarily attached to the special task force. Marai was also a pilot herself, but was temporarily serving as a staff officer on Cottbus base. She would be commanding a unit on the front lines right now, but her MiG-21's maintenance was falling behind schedule, and she had to switch to staff functions.

- We were ready for the losses. Our duty is to not let the grief influence our decision making.

She noticed that Hannibal's eyes were sunken from fatigue. For four days, ever since the start of the attack, he had not rested for a moment, giving precise instructions to his squadrons.

- And what do you yourself think of this situation, Marai? - he asked, raising his voice, but keeping a soft, paternal tone. Clearly, through this conversation with her, Hannibal was trying to show the rest of the staff decision-making at the tactical level, since most officers present had little experience.

- Sir. The success of the Laserjagd will depend on their location, - she answered without hesitation, silently thanking Hannibal for an opportunity to save face. - At this point the situation on the Neisse river line is critical. Mechanised infantry are bearing the heaviest losses.

On the projected map were clearly visible the outlines of the three main fortified sectors - Cottbus, Spremberg and Boxberg, covering an area approximately 60 kilometres from north to south, 15 kilometres deep. Practically speaking, the fortified line had been erected between the Neisse river, former border with Poland, and the Spree, 20-30 kilometres to the west. The line ran along the entire border of the country, and was meant to be its shield against the BETA threat.

After the disaster of Operation Palaiologos in 1978, the fall of Poland the following year, and the BETA advance up to the Oder, the NVA constructed a defence line. Official propaganda called it the "The Eastern Shield", a great wall that would protect European civilisation.

- This prolonged engagement has resulted in approximately sixty percent casualties in forces defending these three sectors. The remaining forty percent have been forced to retreat to the second and last reserve line. The only things that could change the situation in our favour would be airstrikes and artillery support - both impossible with the Lux still active.

Marai looked at another window, showing the current positions of the airforce and artillery brigades. Most of them were concentrated on the west bank of the Spree.

- For that purpose were deployed the six rocket artillery brigades, with both the UN and NVA air forces standing by on the Elbe.

[11] Note: groups (or wings – depending on the country) are usually led by a more senior-ranking officer, Colonel or even Brigadier General for bigger units; however the NVA's equivalent (Jagdfliegergeschwader) were frequently commanded by officers holding the rank of Major or even Hauptmann (captain).

- And if the plan fails?

- We will have to reform all remaining TSF squadrons and attempt a second Laserjagd.

It was easy to see how reckless this plan really was. Squadrons involved in the first operation would have suffered heavy losses, and the pilots' fatigue would be at its peak. However, there was no choice, in the event of failure. The loss of several TSF squadrons to save the breaking front line was quite acceptable from a purely military perspective. In fact, there have been a multitude of precedents.

"Of course, even now we're already losing two squadrons..."

Marai could only pray for a successful hunt - otherwise, the only result of this accumulation of casualties would be a complete defeat.

++Oder-Neisse Defence Line++

At the core of East Germany's battle with the BETA lie the Oder-Neisse Absolute Defence Line. Having participated in the fighting against the BETA from Central Asia to Ukraine since the mid-seventies, the East German army understood very well the Soviet deep battle doctrine, and decided that active defence would only be a waste of forces, planning to stop the BETA hordes with fortifications very much like those used in WWII. Thus after 1978, when the failure of Operation Palaiologos was clear, they began a massive effort of forced evacuation of citizens and building of defensive fortifications in the area. The "absolute" meant to show an intention to construct something that would be able to permanently stop the BETA advance to the west. At the present time, in January 1983, after repelling a countless number of large-scale BETA attacks, the line was still strong. However, due to the ever-increasing strength of the enemy, there was appearing an ever-increasing number of troop shortages and weaker points that were not repaired in time.

- How many Lux are we looking at?

- Our estimates are rough, sir, but we expect around five hundred units. Following the AL artillery strikes and the propagation of heavy metal clouds, we expect their numbers had declined to less than three hundred.

- Which squadron would come into contact first?

- Triple-six, sir, - answered Marai quickly, not showing a hint of emotions that suddenly swelled within her. - The 666th was spearheading the assault from the left flank. I would assume they have started breaking through by now.

- Hm, those fellows are quite reliable, aren't they...

- Yes, sir. They're not called the top squadron of the DDR for nothing.

In command of the 666th was the hero of the last phase of the Polish campaign, captain Irisdine Bernhard, who had time and again demonstrated enviable tactical acumen. By this time, the squadron had more BETA kills on record than any other in the NVA, and its reputation for being top-grade aces was well deserved. That did not mean, however, that their brothers in arms bore any affection for them - many, especially in front line units, had different ways of calling them, the least offensive of which were "those damn snakes". Marai could sympathise with that feeling, but she also understood that it was, in a way, inevitable.

"Besides..."

From Marai's point of view, Irisdine was difficult to manage as a commander, but at the same time too flawless and beyond any reproach.

- We can only rely on their bravery, - she said, turning away to look at Hannibal. She followed his gaze, and had to hide a sudden surge of irritation. His eyes were fixed on one spot on the wall screen - the marker that represented the 666th squadron.

+++1130 hours
++Territory of the former People's Republic of Poland
++22 kilometres east of the Neisse river, in BETA-controlled space

In the raging snowstorm, the eight MiGs of "Schwarzesmarken" were finding their way through gaps between the BETA, flying at only five metres above ground - one false move, and they would be ploughing those snowy fields. Their engines were blasting up massive plumes of snow and dirt behind the machines. Their cockpits were filled with the shrill TAWS alarm[12], - a result of them having to disable the auto balancing system, as it would be too sensitive for this kind of flight.

"...Being a target for the lasers kinda seems easier..."

Making an effort not to curse into the open comm channel, Theodore saw bright dots on the radar - a group of grapplers, only eight hundred metres in front. He pulled hard on a control stick, manoeuvring just in time, managed to swerve and avoid losing speed.

"Scheisse, will you ever end?!.."

Another group in front of him - this time, in much closer formation. He was coming in fast, and a crash seemed an all too real possibility, - he yanked the joysticks towards himself, swooping up to perform an extreme breaking manoeuvre over the heads of the BETA, - all in less than 2.35 seconds, which was the maximum time he could stay up before being hit by lasers.

"Goddamn it, just give us the new MiG-23s already, or some of the western kites!"

His face, tense because of the G stress, had a singularly fierce expression.

"The 21's not made for these bloody acrobatics!!"

[12] Terrain Avoidance Warning System - generic term for any system that warns pilots of dangerous proximity of terrain. Also known as Bitching Betty.

Breaking formation now, among the BETA, would have meant certain death, - after all, in this situation the other machines wouldn't waste time saving their wingman. Theodore himself had to abandon more than a few hapless pilots who made the mistake of getting separated. However, it could have been even worse. If the diversion hadn't worked, they wouldn't even have a gap to squeeze into.

{{ Outta my way, you bloody monsters!!}} the shout suddenly came through his headset, followed by the rattling of an assault rifle burst. Theodore clicked his tongue in disapproval. Walter, guessing what happened, snapped angrily:

{{ Schwarz six, hold your fire! Did you forget your goddamn orders?}}

{{ Negative, sir! Just got rid of a few buggers in my way! Did not forget, sir!}} fiercely replied second lieutenant Annette Hosenfeld, piloting the last machine of the rear-guard. Her short hair shook a little with every burst she fired. {{ I said move, you filthy octopus!!}}

"That idiot... how dumb d'you have to be to ignore Walter's orders..."

Annette continued firing on all grapplers in sight. Several muzzle flashes later, her MiG-21, thrusters at full, swept above the gory mess left of the grapplers she was attacking. Perfect control and flawless execution of the attack, - but if one looked at the bigger picture, it became clear that even without being delayed by such reckless actions, getting through the BETA was not easy.

{{ Comrade lieutenant Krueger! Do something with *that*!}} Gretel sounded hysterical again. She knew that Irisdine left all personnel matters, including discipline, to Walter, and so didn't even bother talking to the captain. {{ These TSFs are precious equipment, entrusted to us by our land and its people! Wasting ammo is treason!! Do you want your subordinate to see a military prison from the inside?!}}

{{ Schwarz six, did you hear that?! Cease fire! *Now!!* }}

{{ This is Schwarz seven! I'll go with six!}}

Another comm window - another face, the one taking initiative this time was second lieutenant Inghild Bronikowski, also a pilot of the rear-guard flight. Like Annette, she was 18, but to Theodore's eyes she looked much more mature, perhaps because of her long, wavy hair and elegant countenance. The three of them graduated in the same year from the same fighter pilot school, and met again in the squadron.

{{ Annette, please, get a hold of yourself! You're putting us all in danger!}}

{{ I know! I... I know that!..}}

The tone of Annette's voice lost all its fierceness. Her psychological state was clearly far from normal - in fact, a pretty common symptom of shellshock. Theodore knew the reason very well: that week Annette lost three people closest to her, three friends from her childhood days. The coincidental death of several friends and comrades with whom she survived the harshest of battles made her lose her balance. In the past several days, her behaviour had been rude, erratic, and generally almost unbearable.

{{ I... I'm happy only when I kill them, the BETA... a-all of them... and the drugs don't help!.. I dream of them every night... I... if this goes on, I...}} by now she was rambling almost incoherently.

"Well then maybe you should've stayed out of the bloody cockpit!" thought Theodore, holding back his irritation at both Annette and Irisdine. It was widely known that shellshocked pilots put themselves, and by consequence their comrades at risk - there is after all nothing more dangerous than an ally you cannot rely on. Despite that, Irisdine let her fly, citing the necessity to have eight machines for this particular formation. He guessed, that Irisdine did it on her own responsibility, - her continued silence at Annette's outbursts proved that. Perhaps she had even ordered Inghild to keep an eye on Schwarz six. For Theodore, however, this was no excuse, even if otherwise this would have destroyed Annette as a soldier and a person.

"While she's whining, her mates'll get killed by BETA!.."

{{ It's all right, Annette, everything's okay. I'll protect you.}} said Inghild in a very soft, calming voice, which only served to annoy Theodore even more. For Inghild, a child of an old Junker family[13], and as such, always treated somewhat distantly, Annette was the only person with whom she really connected. This relationship perhaps was the link that kept Inghild close to Annette, even despite her current mental state.

"Ugh, I'm gonna puke..."

These two were really getting on Theodore's nerves. In his opinion, among pilots, who lived with the fear of death at any moment, such things were for weaklings, and would only hasten their departure to the next world.

{{ Everything all right, Schwarz seven?}} Walter asked, his voice tense. Theodore felt that they were just words - the veteran must know feel the same danger as all other pilots. Gretel's face only expressed sincere disgust - she hated former aristocrats with a passion.

{{ Yes, sir, covering Schwarz six... everything will be okay, - right, Annette?}} replied Inghild, trying too hard to be cheerful. Annette, her eyes suddenly lifeless, nodded slowly, as if in a daze.

{{ Copy... hey son, you watch those two as well, all right?}}

Walter's unexpected order caught him napping.

"Why me of all people?!.."

{{ You got it?}}

- ... Yes sir, I copy, - Theodore answered, trying very hard to keep his annoyance out of his voice, and grabbed the control sticks so hard it looked like he was trying to squeeze the life out of them.

[13] Just in case, this has nothing to do with the English word "junk", nor with Freelancer or Gears of War. Junker (youn-keh) families are Prussian landed nobility. Her family name kind of confirms it (see translator notes for references).

Not a second later came Irisdine's command:

{{ Squadron, *achtung!* Two klicks to target. Prepare to clear out LZ in five hundred metres. It's time for the hunt! Do keep me company!}}

On the map appeared a concentration of dots, representing the swarms of laser-class targets.

"Well, here's where we live or die!.."

With a shiver, he looked at the horde of BETA they were approaching. From now on he and his comrades would have to fight in close quarters, completely surrounded by the enemy.

Several groups of laser-class units were surrounded by a sizeable force of other BETA. To complete their main objective they would have to eliminate those first, otherwise the squadron would be crushed between waves of monsters. In the worst case scenario, fort-class species from the very back of the horde would reinforce the enemy here. It was imperative to destroy the Lux and egress as fast as possible.

{{ Not a very pleasant sight, I must say, ma'am. I wonder, how does this compare to a Hive infiltration op?}} asked Walter, and Irisdine answered in the same, level tone:

{{ Oh, much easier.}}

{{ Really? Why so?}}

{{ I'm afraid I've no sense of direction.}}

This time almost no one laughed, but it was a fact that this short exchange did relieve some of the tension after the incident with Annette.

{{ Canister shot, two volleys! *Feuer!!*}} finally came the captain's order.

The barrage wiped out a part of the herd that was underfoot. Several moments later, the smoke cleared, revealing the dead BETA bodies, - and among them stood eight tactical fighters in perfect battle formation.

+++1135 hours
++Territory of the former People's Republic of Poland
++30 kilometres east of the Neisse river, in BETA-controlled space

Looking over the dreary panorama, Theodore sighed once again. The retinal display showed his comrades in formation, and the endless sea of enemy contacts around them. Grapplers and tank-class species swarmed towards them like flies to a corpse.

"And the Lux are on the other side of this... wall?.."

He gritted his teeth. Completely surrounded, the unit could not use fire and retreat tactics, and could not attack the laser-class from a distance. The only option still open to them was making a perfectly coordinated assault, using the BETA closest to them as shields, and breaking through to the pockets where the laser-class groups were.

"No way in hell am I gonna die in this place!.."

He grinned savagely, and in that grin were both the bloodlust and the mortal fear of a cornered beast.

{{ All units, *achtung!* }} Irisdine's confident voice rang in his ears {{ Commencing Laserjadg! First unit will engage in close quarters, second provides covering fire. Bestow upon them our black marks! 666th squadron, *vorwärts!!* }}

At her command, all the machines of the 666th rushed forward as one.

Irisdine was charging ahead across the snowy field, using short boost jumps to gain speed. Walter followed her close, Theodore was behind and to the left of him, and Gretel even further to the left. In front of them was a wedge-shaped group of BETA with ten grapplers with a hundred tank-class beasts surrounding them.

{{ We'll cut through them, Walter! Four and eight, cover us!}}

Irisdine was a firm believer in the idea that the commander should be at the forefront of his unit, and under no circumstances would let anyone else have the honour. Even Theodore had to recognise her bravery and determination... even if it annoyed him oh so much.

Only a dozen metres separated her from the BETA in front, when she gave a triumphant battlecry and activating the rocket engines, she soared above the grappler.

Suddenly reversing her booster nozzles so that they pointed up, she made her machine dart downwards, holding the "Shürzen" so that its bladed edge pointed towards the sensory organs on the grappler's back. Predictably enough, the edge split the beast's filmy skin, and sliced its torso in two. Thick red fountains of whatever passed for blood among their misbegotten kind sprayed over her machine, bits of flesh and innards flying in all directions. That grappler was most certainly out of the picture. A moment later, Walter executed the same attack at a sharp angle, and another grappler found itself hacked apart.

"*Damn* they're good!!.."

Theodore, covering the lead machines, had the time to fully admire this display of skill. It was quite clear that no one without the exceptional control over their machine that those two were able to achieve could hope to perform such a feat. Such precisely timed jump booster control was something an average pilot wouldn't even be able to imitate. And thanks to the efficient coordination of the four machines, the grapplers were down in less than sixty seconds. There didn't seem any other BETA capable of doing anything in the immediate vicinity.

{{ Schwarz one to four and eight! Secure sector 05-8!}}

{{ Roger!! I'm going in, eight!}}

- Jawohl!

This time it was Theodore and Gretel's turn to make a fast jump towards their target. In their sector were a dozen grapplers and fifty tank-class BETA, the latter already being chewed up by covering fire from the rear-guard unit, - but the grapplers, noticing the threat, began to move in.

"Hah, as if we'd stop here!.."

Theodore, giving several bursts from his rifle, almost without aiming, rushed onwards. Annihilation the BETA was secondary to securing the marked coordinates, so they paid no heed to the enemy, and not a minute later, they landed at their designated point, crushing some grappler corpses under their iron boots.

{{ Four and eight, you got incoming at three o'clock! *Vorsicht!*}}

They barely had time to react to the warning, as a small group of enemies emerged from the blizzard. They were barely three hundred metres off.

{{ Ah, no!..}} Gretel moaned.

At this range, it was clear that they wouldn't have time to stop them with fire alone. Theodore instantly took the decision, discarding his assault rifle, - immediately, an automated auxiliary arm took the CIWS-1A combat knife out of its compartment, and he grabbed it with his right manipulator in a backhand grip.

{{ L-lieutenant Eberbach?!}}

- Please stay back! I will stop them! - Theodore quickly cut her before she could say anything. He normally found having to address her politely very annoying, but in this situation it was the last thing on his mind. - Support fire, lieutenant!..

{{ Roger!!}}

To say that taking on a grappler in close combat with a knife made for disposing of the smallest classes was reckless, would be an impressive understatement. One hit from their massive forearms, and the TSF was scrap.

Ready to win or die trying, Theodore waited for the first grappler to approach and lift his arm for the strike - and kicked off from the ground with a hoarse battle cry. With split-second timing, he dove under the beast's right shoulder joint, and took the blow on his shield.

The Shürzen's reactive armour exploded - Theodore's field of vision was filled with a blast of brilliant orange, and half of the beast's claw was blown off. The TSF shook viciously under the terrible impact.

- Bastard!!..

He glanced at the system monitors - it looked like the pressure on the left elbow joint had spiked beyond critical. Not even waiting for the machine to recover from the blast, he changed his posture, anticipating the movements of the grappler, whose left arm was still functional. In the next moment, with another triumphant cry, he dashed forward, slicing clean through the beast's other joint - his blade rent the membranous skin, and the beast's arm was cut off, flailing feebly.

- Next!!

As if through sheer force of will he righted his machine, which was ready to fall over, and met the next grappler head-on, this time driving the shield's sharp edge in the middle of its torso. Its whitish skin wasn't a match for that steel.

- And you're finished!

The remaining reactive armour on the front side of the Shürzen did its task magnificently - the explosion blew the beast to pieces.

"Any others?.."

Looking around, he only saw Gretel finishing off some stragglers. Realising that the immediate threat was gone, he could finally catch his breath, stowing away the combat knife and picking up his rifle. He was trying to control his breathing to calm himself down, feeling a strange mixture of relief and lingering mortal terror.

Just as Walter and Irisdine were unmatched pilots, Theodore excelled in close quarters combat, especially using the combat knife and shield together. This mastery was something he needed to survive this hunt for the laser-class.

“Well, that's it, can't do the same next time...”

He glanced at his shield, scorched by the explosions of the blocks of reactive armour, and frowned. It wouldn’t be able to save him from the laser anymore.

{{ Schwarz one to four and eight! Move to 05-0!}} he heard Irisdine’s urgent voice in his headset.
{{ Visual on Lux, repeat, visual on main target! Me and Walter are going to draw other BETA from them! Make it fast you two!!}}

“Finally! We got them…”

Theodore didn’t notice himself that his face brightened. He felt as if a ray of light shone upon them in this darkness.

Indeed, in the darkness and whirling snow, in-between the other BETA, something greenish wriggled – their main objective, the first group of the laser-class species, about thirty units.

{{ Rear-guard! Cover four and eight!}}

{{ Roger that!}}

Only then Theodore noticed the voices of Annette and Inghild among the chorus of those acknowledging orders. The two machines were covering the rear, delaying enemies that came from that direction. Annette's MiG carried a weapon unusual for European battlefields – a standard PLA Type-77 long sword[14]. In the past, the DDR imported these from China, though very few squadrons continued using it. For ordinary pilots, not too fond of close combat, it was an unwieldy weapon, but Annette had displayed her affinity for it ever since TSF pilot school.

{{ Take this!!}}

Raising the glaive above her head, she slashed down at the grappler in front of her. The grappler raised his arm to block the strike – but the glaive cut through it, sending bits of cracked armour and flesh flying.

{{ There's more where that came from!! Diiiieee!!!}}

Her heavy glaive rose up slowly, and fell again on another grappler.

{{ Annette, tank-class on your ten! Careful!}} shouted Inghild, who had been giving her partner precise covering fire all this time. It looked like she was having a tough time because of Annette's wild and unpredictable movements. She didn't let it show on her face, however, and continued her support action, but her eyes darted back and forth as she tried to follow the positions of the forward units at the same time. It placed a great deal of strain on her, and was frankly dangerous – she had to understand it very well herself.

{{ Forward, four and eight – take those Lux down! I give you sixty seconds!}}

Spurred on by Irisdine's order, Theodore looked forward. The captain and Walter had drawn off two dozen grapplers by themselves, and very few now remained guarding the laser-class.

{{ Roger!! Comrade lieutenant, I'm going in! We'll use the grapplers on our eight as a shield, and give a volley of canister shot!}}

- Roger!

With another battle cry, Theodore charged the enemy.

+++1150 hours
++Territory of the former People's Republic of Poland

[14] No idea why the wiki lists it as a halberd – the kanji here could stand for "naginata" (which is a halberd-like polearm; since it's Chinese, it would be a guan dao, or in European terms, a glaive), but the first kanji is different from the one normally used (薙刀 – naginata, while here it is 長刀 – choutou, long sword); and the pictures make it evident that it's a one-handed sword.

++30 kilometres east of the Neisse river, in BETA-controlled space

“A vibration… that wasn’t one of our shells…”

Inghild was the first to notice it. Providing fire support for Annette, she was distracted for a split second.

The blizzard and the clouds of dirt and snow that hung above the battlefield made it next to impossible to see anything but one’s immediate surroundings. Inghild didn’t even bother to look at the radar, which was as good as useless under the heavy metal clouds, but instead turned her eyes back to Annette’s machine. Her partner was still swinging around that huge weapon, but she was more and more worried.

“Please come back safe…”

The thought that at this point Annette was accumulating a lot of fatigue and stress didn’t leave her mind. The time granted to her was clearly coming to an end, and soon she would be sent back to the base to recover her mental stability. Cases of shellshock were common on this terrible field of battle. What awaited those whose mind broke was a stay in a special military hospital – which, in this country, was little different from a labour camp, where they would meet their end as a human being. The current administration of the DDR did not even want to admit the existence of soldiers whose spirit was broken.

“But then if this war ends, and she survives, maybe there’ll be time for her to recover… so I have to keep trying, for her sake!..”

Only fifteen minutes from the start of the battle, the 666th had already eliminated two groups of laser-class BETA, and were now breaking through to the third and last. The presence of four other groups had also been confirmed, but signal flares indicated that the other TSF squadrons, previously delayed, had successfully made contact with their targets. Ten minutes remained until the planned start of full-scale bombardment from the front lines, and if everything went well, they had largely enough time to finish mopping up any stragglers.

“Gah, again!..”

She glanced at her comrades’ faces – none of them seemed to have noticed anything. However, even if her MiG-21 was equipped with vibration sensors, with these numbers of BETA around it was simply overwhelmed. It was therefore not surprising that a human felt unusual vibrations first. And sure enough, moments later a graph appeared on her retinal display, showing abnormal vibrations, followed by a shrill warning buzzer.

- It can’t be! Here?!..

The message spelt death for the entire squadron.

- A herd of destroyer-class?!..

◊◊◊

- Destroyer-class?! – Theodore whispered, looking at the same graph as Inghild, as if unwilling to believe his own eyes, - We're in the bloody middle of the BETA herd!

{{ No mistake, this is their signature!}} shouted Inghild {{ Around seventy units, distance 2500, speed… over a hundred and fifty kilometres an hour?! In visual range in less than sixty seconds! Proceeding in close formation!}}

Theodore growled, gritting his teeth.

"Sheisse! Just a bit more time and we would've wiped out the target!"

A mixture of dread and bitterness boiled up within him. Eight fighters, surrounded by an entire herd, standing against a rush of the destroyer-class – one couldn't call this situation anything other than desperate. Seeing as they weren't finished with the laser-class, they wouldn't be able to evade by with simple boost jumps, and retreat was out of the question until their target was down. He couldn't expect the political officer, Gretel, to allow it.

"Desertion under enemy fire is punishable by death, after all…"

Perhaps the only option remaining to them would be to fight until the last moment, then set their engines to overload and destroy themselves along with any BETA nearby. Was this then the end?.. He gripped the control sticks once again, growling in protest.

{{ Don't get distracted!}} came Irisdine's sharp command. Her facial expression did not change by one iota. {{ All units, form on me!}}

In the face of imminent destruction, her voice was also perfectly steady.

"Damn it, what's she thinking?!..."

But he himself was already moving, and several short boost jumps later he was standing next to the lead MiG-21. Other machines followed shortly. All of them were quite a sight, covered in BETA entrails. They had on average thirty percent ammunition, though Inghild, covering Annette, was below twenty.

{{ Why this, comrade captain?!}} Gretel was shouting again, pale-faced, clearly aware of the destiny that awaited the squadron. {{ We should spread out and head towards the laser-class! If even one or two machines make it through, our mission would be complete! It's not too late yet! And if we're killed, it's even--}}

{{ We would be killed before reaching them. I cannot accept such a tactical move.}}

{{ Then what, are you planning to meet them here?! Impossible!..}}

{{ Listen up, squadron! Fire by rank, switch your 120mm to sabot or squash head[15] ammo!}} she ordered, ignoring Gretel completely.

She was the first ready her assault gun, and Theodore followed reflexively, all the while staring angrily at the commander's face in the comm window.

"Is she insane? Firing by rank is just as suicidal against the Ruitare!.."

{{ …You do realise that stopping them is imp--}}

{{ We will fire at the front group, stop them in their tracks! Then break through to the last Lux group!}}

"Wha…"

Theodore was speechless again. This time he really doubted the captain really meant what she was saying.

"…break through them?!..."

Not paying heed to all the other pilots, clearly at a loss for words, Irisdine continued:

{{ Behind the charging destroyers there have to be very few BETA. We'll use that! We don't have any other choice for destroying them until the bombardment starts!}}

It was essentially, true, - the speed difference between the destroyer-class and other BETA made a gap quite likely.

"Really… no other choice…"

Theodore understood the theory behind this move, but that didn't mean he wasn't scared. Breaking through a destroyer-class wave from the front really wasn't something commonly heard of… but at this point the only thing he could do was follow orders. No matter how uneasy they made him, or how much he hated the captain.

{{ All units, fire on my command. Aim at the legs of the leading destroyers!}}

- Roger! – Theodore shouted in reply, feeling despair encroach upon his soul. It might have been the same for the others, too.

{{ Then, on my order, we will begin the breakthrough manoeuvre. Do not, I repeat, do not break your element[16]! If we stop them, they're not a threat anymore!}}

[15] She's referring to: APFSDS - Armour-Piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding Sabot rounds, modern AP shells that use kinetic energy to penetrate the target's armour, with the penetrator being made of dense materials, such as tungsten or depleted uranium alloys; and HESH - High explosive squash head shells, designed to "squash" a layer of plastic explosive on the armour and detonate it, transmitting the shock wave through the layer of armour (or concrete) instead of penetrating it. Effective against fortifications and older tank armour (non-composite).

The trembling of the ground was becoming more and more noticeable, and their TSFs shook.

{{ Once we break through, we turn towards the Lux, finish them off – and get out of here!}}

Walter's rough voice interrupted her:

{{ Visual on destroyer-class, distance 1000… they're here!}}

In the next moment, the destroyer horde broke through the blizzard in front of them, a living wedge parting the billowing curtain of snow…

Twenty seconds to contact. Theodore's heart was seized by a dreadful, oppressing feeling.

"Stopping… that?!..."

{{ All units, feuer frei!}}

- Jawohl!!

They focussed all their attention on the approaching enemy. Simultaneously, eight bright flashes erupted from their assault guns, and without waiting to see if the shells hit, they fired one volley after another.

"This has to stop them… it has to! Or..."

Irisdine's calculations seemed to be confirmed, as several hits exploded their targets – the destroyers didn't even pause, and rushed on, scattering bits of gore, but the second and third hits exploded legs, sending them off balance, and one after another they tumbled. The ones that relentlessly came after them tried to evade the fallen, but inevitably got caught and tumbled themselves, - and so did the next wave. In one tremendous chain collision, the destroyer-class group was in tatters. A strange hush fell on the group of pilots watching this spectacle from a distance.

{{ It can't be…}} muttered Gretel, obviously couldn't believe her eyes. Theodore for once was inclined to agree. He didn't know how much of this was the result of a precise calculation by the captain, but the fact was, they managed to stop the thunderous charge.

{{ All units, break through before they get up again! Move, schnell!!}} shouted Irisdine triumphantly, taking up her burnt shield.

{{ Roger!! Moving out!}}

{{ Hurensöhne!!!}

- Raaaaaahhh!!!

[16] To remind you – an element is the smallest unit of TSFs, two machines.

Stirred up by the battle cries of his comrades, Theodore charged. In front of them sluggishly moved the devastated destroyer herd, and the eight machines used horizontal boosts to quickly reach and penetrate the group, rushing through this small gap in the enemy before it closed.

«So we're lucky they were too close together, eh...»

They passed very close to the wriggling bodies of the Ruitare, who without legs looked like helpless caterpillars – a very strange sensation it was, passing so near the beasts that no one ever thought of engaging in close combat.

However, he didn't have long to appreciate the strangeness of the situation. As soon as they passed the first rows of destroyer bodies, several dozen of the herd began trying to resume their attack, with one group intent on blocking their breakthrough route.

"Damn, they recover fast!.."

{{ Squadron, no distractions – move on course!}}

Theodore looked around to confirm the position of the captain's machine – and almost gasped in surprise. Her element stayed in the rear, evidently setting up a firing position.

{{ Me and Walter will deal with the ones coming from three o'clock – you get all the speed you can form those engines and get to the Lux!}}

"Her, in the rear guard? The commander?!.."

He swallowed hard. She was planning to cover their advance and take on the charge of a destroyer unit with only two machines. He looked around – all pilots, including his partner, Gretel, were following orders, moving on, while Irisdine and Walter set up in a stable position and prepared to fire. However, one after another destroyers were stirring up around them – they would be surrounded any minute. A moment later, on the course of the charging squadron appeared another group of more than fifty smaller, vaguely humanoid BETA appeared, escorted by tank-class monsters.

"Lasers!.. Now?! Sheisse, what to do?!.."

It wouldn't do to lose Irisdine here, as she was the force that kept the squadron together, - no matter how much he may have disliked her, it was only true. But if they managed to destroy their target now, they might be able to escape this hell sooner…

Meanwhile, the squadron's machines made their way through the destroyer corpses.

{{ Schwarz two to Schwarz four. Comrade lieutenant, please take Theodore and cover the commander! Annette and Ighild's machines could also turn back to assist!}}

{{ Lieutenant Lan?!}} Gretel sounded surprised. No wonder, the rear-guard leader Pham Thi Lan sounded like she was giving advice to her, a superior officer.

{{ There's nothing but tank-class around the Lux! Two machines can take care of it all in less than ten! If comrade lieutenant would lead the other machines and cover the commander..!}}

{{ Our mission's priorities are clear, and they're in front of us – the laser-class!}}

{{ And if the commander's element gets wiped out, we are the destroyers' next target! And if that happens, we won't be able to complete our mission!}}

{{ *Lieutenant!* I would remind you who has the command authority here!..}}

Gretel was sounding more and more unpleasant, and Pham kept quiet. However, several seconds later, the political officer muttered:

{{ However, it is true that comrade captain is vital to this squadron's combat effectiveness…}}

Theodore did sense that Gretel was very uncomfortable saying this, but naturally, he wouldn't question it.

{{ Right. Lieutenant Pham Thi Lan, quickly finish them up! I will not forgive any mistakes!}}

{{ Jawohl! Everyone, you heard it!}}

- Roger, - Theodore, ready for it, immediately reversed his movement with his jump boosters.

Four machines quickly turned back to Irisdine and Walter's position. The two were still firing, using destroyer corpses as cover. However, it looked as if they were out of shells for their 120mm guns, firing with their assault rifles. It was clearly only a matter of time before they would be overwhelmed.

{{ Comrade lieutenant, did only Pham and Sylvia go for the lasers?!}} Irisdine sounded unhappy. She must have heard the previous exchange, and didn't ask why the four returned at all.

{{ Do admit your error of judgment, comrade captain! It is not the commander's job to show an example of recklessness!}}

Gretel promptly started to fire at the destroyers. Theodore later swore he could see a smile on Irisdine's lips right before she cut the transmission.

Annette and Inghild were also firing.

{{ Diediediediiieee Schweineeee!!!}}

He could hear the chatter of their assault files - they were out of 120mm shells, too. A consequence of this soft-hearted girl following her idiot partner who was simply firing at everything that moved, - Theodore frowned again. However, with four other machines they were wiping out the destroyers much faster. The corpses were in the way of the surviving BETA, so they were unable to pick up speed and could only prowl around.

…but after finishing off another one, low ammo warnings flashed on his retinal display. He cursed, and quickly checked his reserves of 36mm – only two magazines. And the BETA – there were others now, besides the destroyers. From between the corpses came grapplers and tank-class beasts.

“Not good, not good at all, they just keep coming!..”

Theodore, understanding just how unfavourable the situation was, retreated again, behind another corpse – but the BETA, as if sensing that, came after him.

“Dammit, they still haven’t finished?! We’ll get wiped out at this rate!..”

From the corner of his eye he could see Annette’s machine, now without assault rifle or even shield, holding her sword with both hands and hacking away, while Inghild still covered her partner – her own ammo count must have been low as well, since she was giving very economical, precise bursts. The BETA were pressing them, but Inghild cleverly used it to her advantage, not letting them get close with a combination of quick manoeuvres and short bursts of fire. He didn’t think it was his job to support them – after all, they wasted ammo themselves, and if he went in, he’d probably end up spending the little he had left.

Checking the time again, he realised they had three minutes left, and scowled.

“When the bombardment starts, we’ll be blown to bits with everything else down here…”

{{ This is Schwarz one – squadron, achtung!}} Irisdine’s order was mostly directed to those left behind to hold against the remaining destroyers. {{ Pham’s element destroyed the Lux! Therefore we withdraw – jump to 100 immediately! Move it!!}}

- Roger that!!

“It’s finally over…” Theodore felt a wave of relief wash over him. “If we can just withdraw safely now, I’ll survive this!..”

Trying not to let it show on his face, he pushed the pedal, firing up his jump engines. Now that the laser-class were no longer a threat, simply flying away was a safe option. He turned his attention to the BETA, gathered around them, and—

{{ Evade!! Evade!!!}} Annette was shouting, completely losing her self-control. Theodore turned and saw, as if in slow motion – Inghild’s MiG. The BETA all around it. Its engines firing up. And - a destroyer ramming the machine. The TSF being thrown back, scattering a cloud of broken pieces.

{{ Inghi-i-i-ild!!!}}

- Hurensohn!! – Theodore roared together with Annette, reflexively igniting the jump boosters. – Dummer Arsch, I told you..!

Evading the tank-class underfoot, he turned towards Inghild's machine, now lying on the snow. There were now several dozen grapplers in that area. Her comm window was closed, and read "connection failed".

"Scheisse, why did you let yourself get caught like that?! Actually forget it, now's not the time—"

- Inghild! If you're alright, move! Just move out of—

But he stopped the moment her TSF came into view. Inghild's machine was lying in the snow, its right arm and leg crushed, and several grapplers were busy smashing it. Their arms rose and fell steadily, and with them bits of armoured fuselage and flecks of leaking propellant. It was impossible to discern what happened to Inghild in her control cockpit. Vital signs were unreadable, as if she were dead

- Out of my way, Arschloch!! – Theodore roared, overtaken with rage, driving his shield into a grappler's torso. The beast buckled under his weight, its fluids spraying over the TSF. Theodore twisted the shield in its back, gave a burst from his rifle, finishing it off. A warning of overload in the knee joints he disregarded. - Move!!

He continued spraying the grapplers around him with bullets, shredding them apart, turning the blizzard pink with blood.

Then he saw Annette's machine, standing there as if paralyzed, her sword arm hanging limply.

- What the hell are you doing, Annette?! Move, dammit!

{{ I…Inghild… why… no…}}

- Useless..!

Confirming that there were no more enemies in the immediate vicinity, he pushed away grappler corpses with his assault shield. Finally he saw Inghild's machine, and couldn't help gasping at the state it was in. Its armour was torn apart, and its whole frame twisted and bent.

A second later, concentrated fire wiped out some tank-class creatures that were crawling up to him, and the rest of the machines of the squadron landed, together with Pham and her wingman.

{{ Eight, abandon seven! The bombardment'll start in 120 seconds!}}

In the face of Gretel's threat, Theodore only grasped the control sticks tighter.

{{ The operation's over! Wasting our resources on one pilot whose condition is unknown is—}}

{{ Schwarz one to eight, - Theodore, secure Bronikowski's machine}} Irisdine cut her off. {{ Did you hear that? We take off as soon as you do it.}}

{{ …Comrade captain?! You do understand that we don't have any time left?!}} Gretel was shrieking over the captain's voice.

Theodore, on the contrary, suddenly regained his calm.

- Eight, copy that! Annette, some help over here!!

{{ I… I…}}

- Hurry, dammit, Inghild could be alive, don't you get it? Are you friends or not?!

He could hear her gasping.

- I'll take the right side, you the left, and we'll lift her together! – he ordered Annette, who appeared to sob angrily. He quickly inspected Inghild's machine and found the optimal position for securing it.

{{ C-copy!..}}

The timer was counting down the last seconds, when they were finally ready, and Theodore opened a channel:

- Machine secured! We can move at any time!

{{ Squadron, take-off!}}

A chorus of assent followed, as the seven MiGs ignited their booster engines and took off. As the ground receded from view, Theodore heard a shrill whine above the sound of his engine, and didn't realize it the rocket salvo from the Neisse until they started exploding – his mind had temporarily gone numb. As the 666th squadron flew at full speed towards friendly lines, the ground beneath them blossomed crimson.

+++1210 hours
++German Democratic Republic
++Cottbus sector airspace, altitude 100 metres

From the air, the three defence sectors of the Neisse line looked like the depths of hell. Bodies of BETA strewn everywhere leaked reddish fluids that formed ponds of blood[17].

"We've made it possible to use the air force… the rest is yours…"

The battle still continued, mainly consisting of mopping up the BETA that had penetrated deep into the defensive lines. Formations of helicopters and fighter-bombers braved the terrible weather, swooping down to strafe pockets of enemies. The artillery was still working, too.

[17] Referencing the Blood Pond of Buddhist hell.

As they were in clear, safe skies, their stress from the constant tension of being at death's doorstep, and the excitement of battle, - all of it began to disappear. Their nerves, however, were frayed. They now closed other appeals for help without even looking.

"My mission's over… I did everything I could already…"

Fuel and oil oozed from Inghild's destroyed machine, reminding him again of blood, and flecks of BETA fluids still flew from the other MiGs' black frames. Silence prevailed over their squadron on the way back, whether from the realisation that they may have lost an old comrade, or from relief at coming back from brutal combat.

{{ Squadron, achtung!}} came Irisdine's voice again.

That sharp tone – the voice of a tireless, flawless commander – hearing it, Theodore felt a surge of overwhelming revulsion. As much as he had admired her composure during combat, by now that feeling was rapidly fading.

{{ We will start our landing approach shortly. Lieutenant Eberback, lieutenant Hosenfeld, be extra-careful.}}

Theodore was about to acknowledge when –

{{ Wait, comrade captain! Returning to base is a priority! We have to prepare for a second sortie!}} cut in Gretel.

{{ Lieutenant Bronikowski's condition makes this a race against time. We will land and provide first aid.}}

{{ You have orders to return to our base from HQ! The battle isn't over yet!}}

Ignoring Gretel's protests, Irisdine was bringing her machine down, and Theodore followed silently.

They landed at the rear of the army positions at Fort Spremberg. Near them a national highway ran from the front, and along it marched the troops that were changing positions or retreating to reserve lines, exposed to the bitter cold and raging snowstorm, all covered in snow, dirt, and BETA blood. There were quite a lot of injured as well.

Feeling his MiG shake as it touched down, Theodore let out a long breath. Only now he felt the full impact of the fatigue that had accumulated in his body. Besides…

"What are the odds of Inghild being alive?.."

Her machine was set on the ground carefully, in a sitting posture – it was the safest one for the pilot inside its cockpit. As soon as that was done, Irisdine's voice came again:

{{ Lieutenant Pham and I will take care of lieutenant Bronikowski. All others – remain in your machines… Lieutenant Eberbach, no vital signs?}}

- None, ma'am.

{{ Ah, but, I..!}} came Annette's anguished voice.

{{ Hosenfeld, you stay in, help us - hold Bronikowski's machine steady.}}

{{ Ah- Copy that…}}

The two MiGs knelt near Inghild's machine, their hatches opened, and the main right arm manipulators automatically extended towards the cockpit, allowing both to climb outside.

{{ …Lieutenant Eberbach, with this kind of damage we can't eject her control unit. We need you to use your knife and separate the front of the core module.}}

- …Roger, - he sighed in acknowledgment, expecting this.

He carefully forced the point of his combat blade on the top of the core module, and after a moment, sparks flew and its frontal armour fell off. He let out another small sigh, returning his knife to its sheath.

{{ Come down here. We might need a man for this.}}

Theodore acknowledged rather stiffly – it wasn't really a job to look forward to.

As soon as the cockpit hatch opened, a strong, sulphurous smell – that of dead BETA, or rather, their fluids and gore splattered over his machine – attacked his nostrils. He grimaced, and stepped out onto the extended right palm of his machine, feeling the cold despite the temperature controls of his pilot suit.

The first to reach the other machine's cockpit was Irisdine. Deftly controlling her machine's right arm, she got close to the control unit and stepped in.

{{ You two, come here. I need you to confirm the situation.}}

- Roger.

Inghild was stretched on her seat in the dark cockpit. Her limbs were partly crushed, twisted in the wrong direction, bent at impossible angles. Even the pilot suit was broken, and the damage was particularly severe in the cranial area. Her face was unrecognisable, pulverised from the nose up, and bloody froth was on her lips. Her hair was also bloody – sure sign of a crushed skull… not a picture one could bear to look at for long.

"That's what happens when you get hit by grapplers god knows how many times…" Theodore though, strangely sober. Despite this gruesome sight, he didn't feel anything – no, rather, he couldn't.

Ingild's face, or what was left of it, twisted in a spasm. Every time she took a breath, pink froth bubbled up. Pham took a moment to catch her breath, and gathered her resolve, stepping towards her to ascertain her condition. After a slight pause, she shook her head gently.

- There's nothing that can be done. She has at most thirty – no, twenty minutes…

- …I see. Understood, - Irisdine nodded, bent over Inghild and whispered something in her ear. Then straightened up, took the commander's pistol from its holster, and pointed it at Inghild's forehead.

- All units, attention, - her voice was clear, without a hint of emotion. – Second lieutenant Inghild Bronikowski has sustained serious injuries, and does not have long left. She will not make it to the base. Therefore, I will grant her mercy.

A coup de grace – the captain would shoot her here, in order to relieve her from her suffering.

{{W-wait, captain!..}} Annette's voice was shaking. {{ She's alive! So... why? We can get to the base—}}

- You do not want her to suffer any more than this, do you?

{{ B-but maybe somehow she'll make it!..}}

- Nothing can be done.

{{ …But—}}

- Lieutenant Hosenfeld!

{{ …Yes…}}

- Don't worry. I'll do it myself.

Annette was silent.

- Cut the transmission. I'll do it in five seconds, - Irisdine informed them promptly, in a whisper that was impossible to hear for Annette, but that was picked up by Theodore's receiver.

Five seconds later, a dry shot and the wet sound of something splattering – as per procedure, Pham took Inghild's hand to check her pulse.

- Second lieutenant Inghild Bronikowski, confirmed killed in action. The time is twelve hours eighteen minutes.

- …Very well.

Irisdine went to one knee in front of Inghild, and closed her eyes for an instant, making the sign of the cross. Gretel appeared to wrinkle her nose in annoyance – after all, this was a socialist country that rejected religions and churches.

- The squadron will now proceed to Cottbus base… come on, you two, - she said finally, climbing out.

Pham let her through, and followed wordlessly. Nobody else said a word. Not one person expressed grief.

{{…this is strange…you're all… not normal…}} Annette broke the silence a minute later, whispering. {{…She died! Inghild is dead! And you… it's not normal! And not only now! It was the same with the others!..}}

Theodore ignored Annette's rambling, and climbed on the palm of his own machine.

{{ When someone dies, isn't it normal to feel sad?! Isn't it normal to say how awful it is?! And yet, you all, you never—}}

{{ And if we are, does that change anything?}} someone said in heavily accented German.

It was the disdainful voice of the rear-guard pilot who had stayed silent the entire time, Sylvia Kschessinska. She was the only foreign pilot of the squadron, a citizen of the former Polish People's Republic, picked up by Irisdine during the retreat from Poland several years prior, and stayed with her.

{{ You're being a bother. She died quickly. I guess something good came out of her dying pointlessly after all}} Sylvia finished coolly. A wave of silver hair framed her noble face that was smeared with something that looked like oil or tar. She looked very worn out by the battle.

{{ Wha… what did you say?!}} Annette's voice was rising, shaking again {{ How was it – she was protecting me!..}}

{{ That is exactly what I meant, pointless. We'd rather do without you.}}

Annette gasped.

{{ Chivalry? Friendship? I don't know what they taught her in her "noble" family, but this was a pointless death, and I can't stand it!}}

{{ …Insulting a dead comrade, you!.. you have no sense, at all..?}}

{{ You killed her, right? Stop trying to pass the responsibility onto someone else}} Sylvia cut Annette's hoarse retort. {{ I'll say it clearly if you want it – pilots like you, screwed up in the head, are a nuisance. Only thing they do is raise the casualty numbers.}}

{{ ..Wh—}}

{{ Shut up, both of you!}} Walter raised his voice. {{ We're still in the middle of an operation. Settle it after we get back to base if you have to!}}

Theodore, connecting to his pilot seat, only felt something like resignation.

"In the end, that's all we could do…"

To him, Sylvia's argument was sound. Instead of simply nodding, he steeled his heart.

"Let your feelings go numb… just think of surviving, Annette… you can't go on if you don't do it…"

Besides, he thought, she was the one among them who wasn't acting normal. The Annette he knew before was more cheerful than anyone under any circumstances…

After he and Annette secured Inghild's machine once again, Irisdine gave the order to march.

+++1235 hours
++German Democratic Republic
++Cottbus sector, in the vicinity of the Spree

The scenery before them changed. As they passed the main fortifications, Theodore saw the coal mines and the multitude of roads that led to them. The Cottbus region was the largest producer of coal in the DDR, supplying coal for over forty percent of the country's total power generation capacities. The mines still continued to function, despite being essentially in the very middle of military fortifications. This was the embodiment of the current defensive doctrine – stopping the enemy at the Oder-Neisse line.

"Do they really think it's possible?.."

Theodore felt sharply that the time allotted to his fatherland was dwindling. The strength of the BETA attacks had only been growing over the years, and while so far, it had managed to repel them all, it was clear that soon its armed forces would reach their limit. It was not that one could see definite signs of distress in the NVA, but one look at the losses of TSFs and their pilots would make anyone come to the same conclusion. If the BETA spilling forth from the Minsk Hive brought along the heavy laser class once again, the army would surely be destroyed, - their incredibly powerful lasers and considerable physical defence would make the success rate of any following Laserjagd abysmally low. And considering previous attack patterns of the BETA, they would eventually come. He didn't even want to think what would happen to ordinary people when the front line collapsed. Any trips abroad were restricted and effectually prohibited for most citizens, not to mention evacuation. There was little they could expect in terms of foreign aid – the leader of the Eastern bloc, the Soviet Union itself, had lost most of its territories, and only held on to parts of Siberia and Alaska; other Eastern European countries had their hands full with their own defence. Only their former enemies, West Germany and other Western European countries, sent aid under the UN flag, but it wasn't clear to what extent they could be relied upon. If one believed official news broadcasts, they had only sent a token force, and were pursuing large-scale evacuation plans, - so to them, East Germany was little more than a temporary buffer for the BETA, that would be able to buy them some time.

"Then it's over… for us, and this country…"

Theodore sensed an unbearable heaviness on his heart. This war, with its end in plain sight, next-to-impossible missions, comrades killed by BETA, the need to grovel before the tyrannical political officer, and this split fatherland of his… and then there were the hidden informants, the traitorous bastards…

"That's why I fight only to survive. Not for anything, or anyone else…"

At that moment, a new window appeared on his display. The first to react was Sylvia, evidently surprised:

{{ A request for assistance? From a TSF squadron, no less?..}}

"What?.. All the ones that took part in the laser op should've withdrawn by now…"

Enlarging the window, he quickly found the source of the request. This unit had withdrawn from under the heavy metal clouds, and their datalink should be operational by now—

"Wait… these coordinates..?"

+++1235 hours
++German Democratic Republic
++Cottbus sector, in the vicinity of the Spree

- A UN call for assistance from the territory of Poland? What the hell?

Cottbus HQ was at the moment in a state of confusion. The feeling of relief after the successful Laserjagd operation was dissipating.

- The source is in the former town of Krosno Odrzańskie… I suppose the BETA could've reached there. But it's too far from the UN deployment positions. Could it be one of the retreating TSF squadrons?

- Impossible. We got a confirmation that all units participating in the Laserjagd have crossed the Neisse line, - said Hannibal sharply, turning away from the projector.

Though the UN and NVA troops were fighting on the same battlefield, for counter-intelligence purposes they did not fully share information, - this was the reason why Hannibal and the others could only wonder what kind of unit was sending a distress signal, and the projector showed nothing except their coordinates. Moreover, the signal was also distorted by the heavy metal clouds, blown away from the main battlefield. There was, in other words, no way to confirm what was happening except direct observation.

- What do you think, Marai?

- Sir. Could be a squadron that was engaged in mopping up operations on the Oder, - Marai nodded to the operator, and the projector switched to an image of the former Polish border on the Oder. - When the attack stopped, each army moved a TSF wing to the former border, to confirm that the area was clear and to finish off the stragglers.

An area approximately 70 kilometres wide east of the defensive lines practically became the no man's land in this war. To observe and control it, the NVA, whose ground troops were tied to the defensive lines themselves, deployed the TSFs.

- If the BETA started attacking, the squadrons would then stay outside of the probable laser exposure range, and guard our flanks against possible BETA actions… but there's a lot of things we don't know about the BETA's attack process, and cases when they turn in an unexpected direction aren't rare…

- Do you mean to say that those squadrons could've provoked an attack?

- Yes, sir. In those squadrons a lot of pilots aren't very skilled…

- Any units nearby?

- We should have two TSF units deployed on Hammer base, Eisenhuttenstadt sector. However, they would not be able to comply at this time…

- I see…

Hannibal was thinking for a few moments, when a voice behind his back said:

- They should be saved, major… This is a unique opportunity to put the UN in our debt. The Party would surely approve.

This quiet voice, previously silent, brought a hush over the control room. Normally, the political officer had no authority to intervene in tactical matters… Marai looked at Hannibal's stern profile.

- Call up triple-six. They're closest to the site, - Hannibal said finally, in a grave voice.

- Are we helping them, sir?..

- Yes… isn't it natural, to rescue another human being asking for help? – Hannibal answered with a fleeting smile on his face. His expression looked openly hypocritical.

+++1240 hours
++German Democratic Republic
++Cottbus sector

{{We got new orders from HQ.}}

It was not Irisdine who relayed them, but Gretel. No one challenged her flagrant abuse of authority in this case either, - it was normal for orders with some kind of political significance to come through her.

{{ …A UN TSF unit is sending a distress call from inside Polish territory. We're to reinforce.}}

"Going over a second time in this state? You gotta be kidding me…"

During the Laserjagd, all machines of the squadron exhausted eighty percent of their fuel, and ninety percent of their ammunition. There was also the matter of mental and physical exhaustion of the pilots, - it was not excessive, but certainly not appropriate for any kind of serious engagement with the BETA.

"Do they plan to work us until we break?.."

Could it be that the political officer was planning to waste the squadron to protect herself, shamelessly… Theodore, gripping the control sticks tight, listened to Gretel's words. She was speaking in a tone that made it clear that she knew her superiority in this case.

{{ …But there's no need to send the entire unit. Two machines should suffice. Comrade captain, I'll leave it to you.}}

There was no one who would go against the will of the military and the party.

{{ Understood. Seems like I'll have to go. I'll need all the spare magazines and equipment}} Irisdine replied, unhesitant as ever.

{{ Take what you need}} Gretel replied haughtily.

{{ Please wait, captain! I volunteer to go!}} exclaimed Pham, drawing a grimace of displeasure from Gretel. {{ The captain should be with the squadron on the way towards its main objective! I will go to the rescue—}}

{{ Lieutenant Lan! Don't forget your place!}} Gretel shouted, cutting her short. {{ We're talking about rescuing a UN troop! There needs to be someone of status on our side, not a second-generation immigrant, *lieutenant!*}}

Her words were practically dripping with disdain for any and all who immigrated to Germany[18].

{{ …Don't worry, I'll be careful}} Irisdine smiled. {{ There are no laser-class left, I'll be able to simply fly over the BETA.}}

{{ …Yes, ma'am, but…}} Pham didn't sound too convinced.

[18] This is either another historical fallacy, or just Gretel being a bitch and acting out her family name (see translator notes). This would go against the doctrine of internationalism, and would be characterised as social chauvinism, unacceptable in the real-world DDR and all Eastern Bloc countries.

{{ Your duty is to bring Inghild to the base… Pham?}}

{{ …Copy that.}}

Theodore frowned at the cheap drama that had just played before him. He was particularly sick of the loyalty that veteran pilots showed towards Irisdine.

{{ …And, comrade lieutenant. I'll take lieutenant Eberbach with me. Lieutenant, get the spare ammo.}}

- …Huh? – was all Theodore managed to answer, completely caught off guard by Irisdine's words.

{{ You didn't hear me, lieutenant?}} Irisdine said sternly. {{ Get that ammo, now. We'll depart as soon as we have it. Schnell!}}

Theodore, at a loss for words for an instant, managed to squeeze out a half-hearted acknowledgment.

Finally, the squadron, led by Gretel, took off in the direction of the base, and Irisdine continued:

{{ That area is still a playground for the artillery. Make sure to not get caught up in their blasts.}}

- Roger!

He pushed the control pedals, increasing the speed of his machine. Below him were once again the shimmering fields of slaughter around the fortifications, covered with human and BETA bodies. Ten minutes of flight remained until their destination.

"Why me?!.. She'd normally take old Walter for this kind of stuff!.."

Restraining a growl of anger and protest, he glared forward, at Irisdine's MiG. His heart raced, and for a reason unknown to him he kept on thinking this way, as if something pushed him towards the edge.

"I know what you really are..."

Truth be told, he heard a rumour about her – a rumour that was enough to cause all this hatred. It was said that she, Irisdine Bernhard, got her heroic reputation by betraying her own brother to the Stasi[19].

+++1250 hours
++Territory of the former People's Republic of Poland
++23 kilometres east of the Neisse river, outskirts of Krosno Odrzańskie

They landed approximately three kilometres northwest of the ruined town, close to where the transmission should have been coming from.

{{ Nothing here… did they get the coordinates wrong?..}}

[19] Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, or simply Stasi, was the state security service of the DDR.

His display showed a desolate picture – a few scattered BETA corpses, already half-buried in snow, and as far as the eye could see – the remains of a burned-down forest. As far as he could tell by the amount of snow on the carcasses, they had been killed several days ago.

- Perhaps the distress call itself was made by mistake, - Theodore remarked in a somewhat careless tone, and Irisdine gave a little sigh.

{{ Please just stop being childish… lieutenant Eberbach.}}

Theodore almost choked, his eyes open wide in shock. This was the first time, ever, that she had talked to him this personally during an operation. Forgetting that he was talking to a superior officer, he answered reflexively:

- Me? Childish?!

{{ Yes. You behave like a spoiled brat.}} Her face and tone were colder than the weather outside, and each of her words stung like an icy dart[20]. {{ Why didn't you back up Annette during the previous operation? You understood the state she was in. Walter should've warned you to watch her, as well.}}

- …I realise my responsibility.

…and it doesn't include looking after others – he left that part unspoken. He didn't care what Irisdine thought about it. She, however, turned her piercing gaze towards him, as if finding something she couldn't allow, and said sternly:

{{ Be honest. You thought it was not necessary to help a pilot affected by shellshock. Or – perhaps you even kept your distance, just in case? Is that it?}}

Theodore swore silently, - she saw right through his motives, and he automatically went on the defensive.

"Could it be… she took me with her to talk about this?.. This is being recorded, dammit!"

{{ It was, certainly, a pragmatic decision. However, you also knew that you were shirking off from your duty, and you were afraid that this would be discovered, which is why you didn't say it, correct?}}

- Wha-..!

He was dazed, - and for the first time, Irisdine showed signs of anger, her voice like a whiplash:

[20] Note that she uses "kisama" for the duration of this entire passage – to remind you, a derogatory manner of addressing others, but is perfectly appropriate for military subordinates – however, it adds a lot of strength to her lines, and serves to create contrast later. As there is no equivalent in English, I can only use this rather circumlocutory way to express it, and leave the rest to your imagination.

{{ If you had been looking after them, Inghild might have survived! Perhaps this is a small sacrifice for you, who only cares about his own survival, but to the people who die – it's everything! You helped the political officer, and your commander – then why not your comrades?! And you're not ashamed of living, after that?!}}

Theodore could only clench his jaw.

{{ You're a brat who thinks he knows how the world works! No matter how much skill you have, if you don't use it to save another, you're not worthy of calling yourself an Eishi! Do you not even have any intention of saving the people of our Germany, and all of humanity?!}}

"Not worthy of calling yourself an Eishi" – these words were something Theodore couldn't bear hearing from traitorous scum like her. He lost his composure, and didn't even hear the rest of what she said.

- Not worthy..?! – his voice was rising, shaking with anger. – And you..! You call yourself worthy, then?!

Those words that drew out his guilty conscience were the spark that ignited all of the fury boiling up in his heart, and his rage finally spilled over.

- I didn't save my comrade?! Don't screw with me! It's impossible to save all of them! At that point, if I went down, the whole squadron might've been destroyed! I saved those that could be! That..!

Driven on by an unstoppable wave of emotion, he shouted even louder.

- Yeah! I didn't care about what'd happen to Annette, big fucking deal! And you're trying to pin Inghild's death on me?!

Irisdine was still silent.

- So what, I should go along with some screwed-up pilot out of some feeling of camaraderie or whatever, is that what you're saying? That is a pointless death!

No answer.

- I did my job! And I didn't leave her in danger 'cause I wanted to!.. But you, with you it's different! You know what I'm talking about, right? You and the Stasi—

But the instant that word slipped out of his mouth, Theodore felt like he was thrown under a cold shower, and he immediately regained his composure, - and realising everything that happened, he couldn't say a word.

{{ …Do continue.}}

He breathed in deep, realising that he was literally one step away from the gallows.

{{ You were going to say that I was a dog of the Stasi, an informer, right?}}

The organisation they were talking about was the pride of East Germany, the world's largest intelligence service. Its role was surveillance of citizens of the country, prevention of dissent, as well as operation abroad – all for the sake of its main objective, the upholding of the one-party regime of the SED. The most terrible thing about it was its scale. The agency maintained an extremely elaborate network of informants all over the nation, and the rumour went that one in sixty people – or, as some of more pessimistic outlook suggested, one in ten – was on their payroll. Even the Gestapo of the Nazi era and the Soviet KGB didn't have a surveillance system this massive. The agency thus controlled the thoughts and conduct of all East German citizens. The only thing that remained was the terror before this machine that mowed down all elements of free thought and speech. Being arrested by them, even if one was found innocent, meant torture and severe interrogation – and in the end, practically death in the eyes of society. The army was also a target of their surveillance. To prevent the army form baring their fangs, even occasionally, at the party, informants were introduced on all levels. That was the reason Theodore didn't trust Irisdine or any other pilot, - he simply didn't know who would turn out to be a nark. Even Inghild could've been one. The others were likely feeling the same, deep down.[21]

On top of everything, Theodore heard a rumour that those informants also had a duty to covertly dispose of any reactionary elements they may find in the army, on the battlefield… like now, when he was facing Irisdine. Her piercing gaze was still on him. He suddenly realised that his throat was dry, and he was sweating. However, he was unable to do anything but return her stare. Either he would have to bend his knee, and go over to her side, continuing to live as a dog of the Stasi, or kill her here and now… No, she was likely to kill him first. From fear and accumulated mental strain, his fingers were trembling, almost pushing on the triggers.

"Because of narks like you, I…"

The terrible memories of that time, three years ago, came back, vivid as ever, flashbacks of people he knew and would not ever see again, mixed with overwhelming bitterness and helplessness.

"Family, friends, and even…[22] and that's not it! The torture, the interrogations, being labelled as a reactionary element, left with no choice except the army… and this, again..!"

Again, that growing urge to scream at Irisdine.

"I'm not going to be betrayed and used, not anymore!"

[21] The author's exaggeration is, really, laughable, making it seem like Uber-Gestapo II, for the sake of turning the grimdark up to eleven, like with the political officers, to make more of an impression upon Japanese youths generally ignorant of history (which, unfortunately, seems to be the norm there). The agency was modelled after the Soviet MGB/KGB, and was considered very good at what it did; its reputation and modus operandi weren't that far from other similar services both in the East and West. This whole picture, really, is closer to Warhammer 40k's commissars/inquisition, or maybe for a closer example, especially if you combine that with the social chauvinism previously encountered, an Orwell-esque dystopia.

[22] Note: here he says "aitsu mo" (and him/her), no equivalent in English since we don't know whom he's talking about.

At that moment, he saw a glint out of the corner of his eye – a signal flare in the south. Irisdine already ignited her jump boosters.

- Wait!..

{{ The TSF unit is under that flare! We're not seeing any BETA here because they're all drawn towards that combat!}}

Theodore's thoughts were thrown off balance by this sudden change in situation.

{{ You helped the unit in our battle today, and I'll praise you for it. Now, if you have any remaining honour, as an Eishi, - do your duty!}}

The shrill sound of her machine's engines came through his headset.

{{ If you don't, you will be someone lower than me, whom you so despise.}}

- Wha-..?!

{{ Follow me!}}

- Jawohl!

Theodore slammed in the pedal and took off, tailing the captain's MiG. His thoughts swirled in confusion. He only dared to look once at the captain's face, as if looking for an answer, and turned away. Now, like never before, she was their commander, her icy, radiating beauty more apparent than ever.

Not a minute later, he saw on the horizon black smoke rising above what remained of Krosno Odrzańskie, and a large number of BETA signatures on radar.

"Just like Irisdine predicted!.."

The TSFs were still not in sight, but their presence in the city was a certainty, since the combat was taking place there. They could search the area from the air, but since this was BETA-controlled territory, there was still a risk of exposure to a surviving laser-class, which made any aerial manoeuvres reckless.

{{ We split, and search the area! You take the east, I'll go west. When you find them, report!}}

Theodore hesitated for a moment.

{{ Well?!}}

- Roger that! – he almost spat out the acknowledgment.

Then heard what sounded like a small laugh on the other side of the line.

{{ Good answer, Theodore.}}

"...wha..! Is she playing with me?!.."

Letting a growl escape from his lips, he quickly separated from the captain's machine, making his way towards the districts on the east bank of the river. Carefully watching his surroundings, he slipped out into the main street – it was a maze of collapsed buildings. Avoiding small groups of BETA, he pushed on, and finally opened his channel, shouting:

- Scheisse!! Where are you?! Just say something if you're here!!

Staying here for much longer would be suicide. However, retreat without any results wasn't an option, either… but at that instant, something made him turn, and he saw – an F-4 of unknown affiliation, with a large number of tank-class BETA and grapplers around it, on a small plaza surrounded on all sides by apartment buildings. It had already discarded its assault rifle, and was fighting with its combat blade.

- Found you—ah!

–A grappler struck the Phantom right in the waist.

The temptation was there for an instant – the pilot was likely beyond help, and he could get away alive from the battlefield. But then came the vision of Inghild's bloodied, twisted body, and the sound of the gunshot, and those pale eyes, full of suffering, - and Irisdine's words, that shone like a signal flare. As if that was the answer he had been looking for – he didn't know what was worthy of an Eishi, or what meaning there was in their deaths, and whether he, who lost everything, had the strength to save someone else. But—

- Get away from that, Scheisskerl!! – Theodore roared, and charged straight into the BETA.

+++1305 hours
++Territory of the former People's Republic of Poland
++26 kilometres east of the Neisse river, town of Krosno Odrzańskie

Theodore looked around, breathing heavily. There were no more BETA in sight – at least, not living ones, the bodies of a hundred or so smaller types scattered around. There were no signs of new groups approaching either, so he checked his remaining ammunition – fifty bullets in the magazine, and no more spares. Finally he looked at the F-4 Phantom that he saved. No markings were discernable, and even its original coating was hard to guess, since the machine was covered in BETA fluids. The jump unit was clearly damaged, and the one blow of the grappler did irreparable damage to its pelvic joints. However, no other machines were in sight, and there were no other signs of battle.

"Fighting alone?.. well, that doesn't matter for now…"

No signs that the pilot escaped the machine, since the control unit was in place. In fact, he was probably alive inside, the machine's emergency first-aid functions having disabled him.

"Ah, forgot about Irisdine!.."

- Schwarz eight to Schwarz one, do you copy?

{{ Theodore! What's the situation?!}} shouted Irisdine over the sound of automatic fire.

- Found and secured one Phantom, heavily damaged, no other machines in sight.

{{ And the pilot?!}}

- Unknown. Going by the damage to the machine, might just be shocked.

{{ I'm a little busy right now, but I'll finish it up quickly. Retrieve the pilot, and get out of the urban areas. Rendezvous at our landing site in five. Go!}}

- Roger…

He realised that she immediately cut the transmission – looks like the situation didn't allow for idle chat.

"Should I go to help her?.."

And then he noticed how much his own mind changed over this short period of time.

"…Did I really just worry about someone who could kill me?.." - the thought bewildered him. She could use the audio recording of their previous exchange to sell him out to the Stasi… and yet, he instantly felt that this simply didn't match. Her attitude wasn't like one of a person who would try and trap other people.

"What's with that woman…"

Trying to shake off these thoughts, he turned towards the downed F-4.

"I won't let myself be tricked… no, never again…"

It looked as if the control unit's ejection system was still operational, so the best way was simply to open the hatch manually and get the pilot.

He got out himself, and standing on the palm of the right hand of his MiG, approached the Phantom's chest console, inputted the standardised emergency unlocking sequence, and the hatch opened. Several seconds later, the control unit slid forward with a heavy metallic sound.

Theodore's heart was pounding, - the grim picture from less than an hour before was still too fresh in his mind.

As soon as the control unit stopped moving, he looked in – and his eyes opened in shock. In the pilot's seat was lying, unconscious, a young girl, her long, brown hair in a ponytail. Her slender body was wrapped in the standard uniform of the Bundeswehr…

Episode end

+++Schwarzesmarken Staff

Original creator: Yoshimune Kouki
Character design and art: CARNELIAN
Mecha design: Yoshimune Kouki
Writer: Uchida Hiroki

+++Translator Notes

[Various bits of information that would likely be of some interest (…or maybe not).]

First, a small thought/remark on one of the main terms we come in contact with in the MLA universe. TSF pilots, as we know, are called "Eishi" - an archaic term that was used to denote soldiers that stood guard at important posts (the imperial palace, shrines, etc), obviously an attempt to stress their elite status. However, the Japanese as we know like their wordplays based on similarities of pronunciation, - so it is not too far-fetched a guess that "eishi" is a wordplay both on that meaning, and on the Japanese pronunciation of "ace", which would be very close (struck me the first time I played MLU). For convenience's sake, however, I've continued calling them "pilots".

Various background info bits and pictures are inserted at their approximate location in the original text (poorly stitched together and hastily photoshopped, I'm afraid). Also included the first and last pages for the sake of completeness.

All toponyms are real-world place names, you can look them up. Locations of major hives at that point in the Alternative timeline include: Minsk (Belorussia), Rovaniemi (Finland), Uralsk, Surgut and Velsk (Russia), Ekibastuz (Kazakhstan), Mashhad (Iran), and, naturally, Kashgar (the Original Hive).

The name of the squadron itself is unless I'm very much mistaken, bad German (should be "Schwarze Marken"), however the kanji read "black judgement" (Treasure Island roots obvious, though it I didn't translate them as "The Black Spots", because that sounds like the name of a hipster boy band). Their

nicknames are, in Japanese, "Shinigami" (hence Reapers) and another word that means "separate", but also "cull" (hence Butchers, call them the Culling Squad if you want). Also, I swear their emblem has a Tyranid head on it.

The assault shields' name remains elusive. Furigana says "scherzen", but that would mean "joke" in German, and unless the shield's developers had a weird sense of humour, I doubt this would be its real name. Judging by the fact that they can't into German anyway, I chose the closest possible option - "Shürzen" being armoured side skirts widely used on panzers during WW2. Its kanji also read "multipurpose supplementary armour".

Inserted German words sometimes appear in the furigana (such as "Laserjagd"), sometimes are inserted instead of the very unimaginative Japanese swearwords. Makes it more colourful.

And now to the fun part - character names contain some references (we should celebrate the fact that they're taken from a certain historical context, that is, mostly WWII, and not invented to sound approximately German):

Callsign	Name	Rank	Reference
Schwarz 01	Irisdine Bernhard	Hauptmann (captain)	??
Schwarz 02	Pham Thi Lan	Oberleutnant (first lieutenant)	??
Schwarz 03	Walter Kruger	Oberleutnant (first lieutenant)	(this guy or this guy or even this one- either way, you could say it's a good name for an officer with a lot of experience)
Schwarz 04	Gretel "This is TREASON!!11" Jeckeln	Oberleutnant (first lieutenant)	(click – we're supposed to hate her even more now?)
Schwarz 05	Sylwia Kshessinska	Unterleutnant (sub-lieutenant)	(most probably her)
Schwarz 06	Annette Hosenfeld	Unterleutnant (sub-lieutenant)	(click)
Schwarz 07	Inghild Bronikowski	Unterleutnant (sub-lieutenant)	(from the guy with the awesome name)
Schwarz 08	Theodore Eberbach	Unterleutnant (sub-lieutenant)	(click)
--	Katja Waldheim	??	(click)
--	Claudia Quirnheim	Oberleutnant (first lieutenant)	(click)

--	Hannibal Hölzer	Major	(likely the engineer)
--	Marai Heisenberg	Unterleutnant (sub-lieutenant)	(most probably the physicist)

Our dear commander Irisdine's family name - Bernhard - is an old aristocratic name, which is probably supposed to reflect her character. Hannibal Hölzer's name is for some reason written in the wrong order (as Hölzer Hannibal). Pham Thi Lan's name is unclear (as if katakana ever made things easy), it could be a reference to her (fits the era), but as I'm not really sure I didn't change it.

The regiment's name "Ernst Shurer" (could also be Schuler, Schueller, etc) doesn't seem to lead to anything obvious.

+++Acknowledgments

Creators of MLA (for everything, especially Meiya), and the writer of this series, Uchida Hiroki – giving credit where it's due. My work is only an attempt to spread the goodness. Support them in whatever way you can.

Comrade T. – without whom I wouldn't even know about MuvLuv, and wouldn't be interested in translating it.

The fine people who made WWWJDIC, and the no less fine gentlemen who created FineReader – this would hardly be possible without them.

And most importantly, anyone who reads this – you're making it worth the while. Feel free to spread it around, translate it to your own language, etc. I can be contacted at the original place where our translations are posted (http://xmistervx.blogspot.com/).